

Research on Colorado Election Reforms
A Proposal by the School of Public Affairs, UCD
June 29, 2010

Colorado, along with virtually all other states, is experiencing pressure to adopt election reforms. Two general sources of this pressure are the desire to make elections more accessible, that is, socially equitable; and to make them more efficient, that is, less costly. The cost question is often framed in terms of the benefits of adopting a vote by mail (VBM) system, while the social equity question is often associated with a change of registration date, with election day registration offered as the preferred alternative.

Research Questions

There are two principal research questions that the School of Public Affairs (SPA) will be addressing through the proposal presented here:

Q1: What are the comparative costs for conducting a primary and a general election using vote by mail v. polling place v. voting center?

Q2. How would a change in the voter registration date affect barriers to voting as well as the cost of conducting an election?

The research to be conducted will also explore the relationship between alternative answers to each of these questions; specifically:

Q3: What are the costs impacts of changing the date of registration?

Q 4: What is the effect on barriers to voting that might result from employing an all VBM system?

Research Methods and Samples

Methods. Answering Q1 requires collecting and comparing accurate cost data. In framing an approach to Q1, it has been useful to have an analysis conducted by County Clerk Russ Ragsdale (County of Broomfield) on the 2008 general election. Although Ragsdale's study provides useful information regarding actual costs associated with the 2008 election, the cost of mail in ballots was not separated out, and the estimated cost for doing the same election as a VBM only did not employ a clear and consistent estimation methodology.

In order to develop accurate cost comparisons of different forms of voting, it is desirable to collect data from the upcoming primary and general elections. Since most counties will be using mail in ballots for

the primary, we can use actual rather than estimated costs and compare those costs with matched counties using polling place or voting center alternatives. This data must be collected following detailed instruction so as to ensure accuracy and comparability. This is especially important in Colorado because there is considerable variation amongst counties regarding how elections are conducted.

In order to understand this variation and its potential effects on costs, designing the data collection instrument (which will take the form of a survey to clerks from a sample of counties) will be informed by interviews and focus groups conducted with key informants. At present, it seems most appropriate to have one focus group selected to discuss issues associated with answering Q1, and specifically construction of the cost survey; and then have another focus group addressing issues associated with Q2. Additional key informant interviews will be conducted with individuals not participating in the focus groups. These combined methods should involve between 12-18 informants.

Sample. Reporting the cost data requested to answer Q1 may be time consuming, since it needs to be as accurate as possible. Consequently, participating clerks will need to be personally informed about the study objectives, and they will need to agree to report both primary and general election costs in a timely fashion. They will also have to agree to answer questions clarify any information that appears anomalous.

In order to stay within the cost and reporting requirements of this study, only a sample of counties will be selected to participate in the survey designed to answer Q1. In selecting counties, it is desirable to include a majority of the state’s most populous counties. Where possible, those counties will be matched with one another in terms of similar size voter turnout, but different forms of voting. In selecting rural counties to survey, a similar logic will be applied to identify matched counties. In order to provide reasonable geographic coverage of the state, some additional urban and rural counties are included in the sample, but not as part of matched pairs.

The table below shows a suggested sample. Final selection will be based on discussion with the Secretary of state’s Office, the Commission and an advisory group. Final selection will also be based on securing cooperating from the clerks in selected counties.

	Vote by Mail primary	Polling Place or Voting Center
Counties matched by population	Adams	Weld VC
	Pueblo	El Paso PP
	Routt	Pitkin PP
	Mineral	Hinsdale PP
	Teller	Park VC
	Cheyenne	Kit Carson P
Other counties	Larimer	
	Denver	
	Jefferson	
	Mesa	

In answering Q2, the primary issue is to understand how different registration dates affect barriers to voting. We considered looking at a registration date change to 14 days out as well as an Election Day registration option. However, because of budget limits we propose to examine only the Election Day option.

Methods and Sample. Q2 will be addressed primarily through an electronic survey (e.g., Survey Monkey) sent to all county election clerks in Colorado. In order to ensure the best response rate, it will be desirable to have a cover letter from the Secretary of State's office and/or the Commission.

This survey will focus primarily on issues associated with barriers to voting, but it will also contain some questions that may help generalize issues associated with cost data derived in answering Q1. The focus groups and key informant interviews used to help frame the survey designed to answer Q1 will also be employed to answer Q2. Some key informants may also be contact to help interpret findings from the survey associated with Q2.

Addressing Q3 and Q4 depends on what we find in trying to independently answer Q1 and Q2 and then examining their potential interaction. As a practical matter, it is difficult if not impossible to segregate examination of the questions in this way. Clearly there is a tradeoff in trying to optimize cost efficiency and maximizing social equity (access to voting). How that balance can best be affected is largely a matter of opinion. We will be soliciting such opinions through our focus groups and key informant interviews. We will also be including some questions to address Q3 and Q4 in our electronic survey of all clerks.

Tasks

In the following, we briefly discuss each of the tasks required for the study followed by an estimated budget broken down by task.

- Task 1 Key informant interviews and focus group. In order to make sure that the research addresses the full range of concerns underlying the research questions, we will complete 6-8 key informant interviews and conduct two focus group with county clerks and individuals who have been active in the development of policies governing elections. Our goal will be to understand the range of proposals under consideration and their perceived pros and cons, the factors that drive costs, and the ways that counties differ which are pertinent to understanding the possible transition to a vote by mail system and/or changes in policies governing registration. The information gained will be used to frame a survey of county clerks and inform the development of an accounting framework for determining the costs of elections.
- Task 2 Electronic survey of county election clerks. This survey would be used to elicit both factual information and the informed judgments of county clerks. The goal is to understand the why counties might be differentially affected by changes in mail in ballot and registration changes. We anticipate collecting information on such things as mobility, undelivered ballots, and provisional voting.

- Task 3 Development of an accounting framework. The framework will be employed in collecting information on the costs of elections, whether conducted fully by mail, precinct polling or vote centers. The draft framework will be review by a couple of clerks and advisors to the project.
- Task 4 Selection and recruitment of sample counties. During the primary election, counties have the option of conducting the election with a fully mail ballot or using more traditional methods of polling places/vote centers. Counties that use the mail ballot in the primary will shift to the standard combined system in the general election. To understand the differences in costs, we want to do two sets of first comparisons. In the first comparison we would compare primary election costs in counties using VBM with similar counties using precinct polling or vote centers. The second comparison would compare primary election costs (standardized per registered voter) with general election costs.
- Task 5 Primary election data collection, review, follow-up and analysis. We anticipate sending the accounting framework to the participating county clerks in advance of the election. We would do a phone follow-up to answer any questions they might have about the cost items. Clerks would be asked to provide information on costs. After reviewing findings, we would do follow up phone calls to check on odd or out of line entries. The results would be analyzed, looking for differences in costs between pairs of like counties.
- Task 6 General election data collection, follow up and analysis. The same approach employed in task 5 would be used in task 6 to collect data on the cost of conducting the general election. In this case, the primary comparison would be of the change in costs between primary and general elections for counties that used mail in ballots for the former and in-person voting for the latter. We anticipate collecting general election cost data in the sample counties that did not shift methods as a way of understanding cost differences that are due solely to the shift in the scale of the election, rather than the method.
- Task 7 Write report and present findings. Since we will be collecting cost data from the 2010 general election, how quickly we can get that data will determine when a final report can be delivered. Optimistically, this could be in December, but realistically it may be delayed until January 2011.